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# An Interview with Jane Yolen

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## Abstract

Discusses several of Yolen's stories and her novel *Cards of Grief*: techniques, influences, experiences with critical reception, recurrent imagery.



## Additional Keywords

Yolen, Jane—Technique; Sarah Beach; Patrick Wynne

# An Interview with Jane Yolen

Jane Yolen is a Storyteller who is a master of the short story form. Many of her books are written for a young audience, such as her "Commander Toad" series. Other of her published books are The Magic Three of Solatia and Dragon's Blood. In 1984 she was Author Guest of Honor at the 15th Mythopoeic Conference at Mills College. The following year, her novel Cards of Grief won the Mythopoeic Fantasy Award. She lives in Massachusetts, and recently her collection of Arthurian short stories, Merlin's Booke, was published by Ace Books.

MYTHLORE: You have often spoken generally of Storytelling (definitely with a capital S). It is different from "just writing a story," isn't it? What would you consider the main differences to be?

JANE YOLEN: I call myself a storyteller and I do two kinds (though they both crisscross and feed one into another). I tell stories on the page and I tell stories orally. By that I mean that I am a writer and also that I am a professional storyteller (on stage).

The difference is really, I think, where one perceives the audience to be. When I write, I write for myself, for the audience inside me. If I am writing a children's story, for the child I was -- and in some ways still am. When writing an adult story, for the adult inside. When I do oral telling, I have an audience outside of myself to play off of. So my timing will be different, my pauses, my emphasis. Even if I tell one of my written stories (I do several -- "the Lady and the Merman", "Greyling", "Silent Bianca", "Once a Good Man", "Catbride") they are always a bit different than the written version.

MYTHLORE: From what you have related in various places, it is clear that you have been influenced by an oral tradition of Storytelling. What are the effects it has had on your writing, that is, the effects you are aware of?

YOLEN: Not only have I been influenced by oral storytelling but by folkmusic. I was a folksinger in college and will still perform a capella (I'm a lousy guitarist) when given the opportunity as in the last couple of World Fantasy Conventions. I think the influences are threefold: certainly the folk cadences are a part of me; structurally I am very at home with the folk-story; and everything I write I read aloud because I want to hear as well as see it. I think Lewis said something about that, that a story should be for the eye and ear.

MYTHLORE: Does the oral influence make you extra conscious of the sound of words?

YOLEN: It is not only that. I am conscious of the musicality of my prose. I have often thought that many of my stories ("Greyling" is a good example) could be set to music. I am also aware that I often use the strong stress last syllable to end a sentence like the final note of a song.

MYTHLORE: Do you think that more writers should be forced to read some of their stories aloud, to hone their awareness of sound? For it's clear that many writers don't test the sound of their prose.

YOLEN: It is painfully clear to anyone with an ear that many -- if not most -- writers never read their work aloud. As a writer for children, I was aware of this early but I also feel adult stories should read well aloud. However, go to any reading, where an author reads aloud the words that he or she wrote, and 7 out of 10 times you will understand why the prose is not musical. The author/reader has a tin ear! Parke Godwin had an article in a recent Fantasy Review about reading one's work aloud. It should be read and digested by authors if they plan to give a reading, and considered by those who have never read their own stuff aloud.

MYTHLORE: How much do you shape your own stories to how they will sound when read aloud?

YOLEN: Not only do I read my stories aloud as I am writing, but I have a writer's group -- six women, all professional writers though not only writing for children or writing fantasy -- where we meet once a week and read our stories aloud for comment. There's a test!

MYTHLORE: Does the content of the story shape the form you use, or do you decide your format first?

YOLEN: I begin a story at the beginning and often it finds its own form. Rarely do I say -- okay, here's a (short story, novella, novel, take your pick). However I am most comfortable in the short form. Novels are, for me, more painful and frighteningly formless, getting away from the unwary.

MYTHLORE: Water imagery is abundant in your stories. Does water -- streams and seas -- have a special significance for you?

YOLEN: I am not sure why water fascinates me so. I have lived near water a lot, but never a house right on the ocean or a lake. One of my great unsold books is a study I did with Shulamith Oppenheim (who wrote The Selchie's Seed and This World Invisible, both selchie novels) called Mermen: An Unnatural History. Water certainly seems a female medium, and a last earth frontier. But none of those is the real reason.

MYTHLORE: Does it relate at all to the traditional connection of water with the subconscious, the well-spring of imagination.

YOLEN: Perhaps the well-spring of imagination. But your guess here is as good as mine.

MYTHLORE: In "Dragonfield", the dragonsbane grows in water. Was it something that just sprang up that way, the connection with water?

YOLEN: Dragonsbane needed to grow in water, I suppose, since I had that water right there. Actually, when I started the story, I had no idea what dragonsbane was or how I would use it. Nor was the kite part of it. I just had a picture of the girl kneedeep in water picking this flower. Of course one could remember that dragons are considered water creatures, as well as creatures of air and fire. But I don't know.

MYTHLORE: In "The Lady and the Merman," Borne, when denied the -- so to call it -- ordinary love of her father, comes to an impossible love, the merman in the sea. It is also a fatal love, if one is reading the last line correctly: "She was beautiful for the first time. And for the last." Whatever the water-world

represents for you, doesn't this ending carry a rather ominous tone?

YOLEN: First of all, "The Lady and the Merman" is one of my favorite stories because it is so personal. The sea-captain is my father, only I never threw myself into the sea to get him/escape him. Interesting, though, that her father is a sea captain and therefore a mer/sea man? I didn't realize that until several years after writing the story. My father did not sail, but he did complain about my looks. (My mother was a quiet beauty, my father had a penchant for showgirls. I look like his sisters, a nice Jewish girl.) The story ended that way because -- it had to end that way.

Let me tell you a story. When my oldest two were 8 and 10 I read the "The Lady and the Merman", newly written. My son, the 8 year old, said, "She's dead, hunh?" And I hemmed and hawed and tried to say she wasn't (It's only recently that I have been able to actually and without hedging kill off characters!). But my daughter threw her arms around me and said, "I think you're beautiful, Mommy!" going at once to the heart of the tale.

MYTHLORE: In "The White Seal Maid," when the selkie maid is denied the sea by Merdock's love for her, she ceased to speak. And when she returns to the sea, taking her sons with her, the language she spoke was alien to Merdock, "harsh and jangling to his ear." The story seems to carry a strong sense of fantasy (for want of a better word) being quite alien and removed from the ordinary. Do you really feel that?

YOLEN: No -- and I don't read "White Seal Maid" that way. I think, in fact, that we all live lives that are quietly fantastic. (Ever hear how baby kangaroos are born?) Metaphors are all around us. Unfortunately most people do not see or hear them. I feel lucky that as a writer I have six senses -- just as children do -- the sixth being the sense of wonder we all joke about and call sensawunda. Like any cliche, it seems pretty thin at times, but cliches begin in the real. To me "White Seal Maid" is feminist (but not tract), is about sacrifice and earned love, about seeing things through a scrim of fantasy (did he ever, until confronted by her desertion, really see her and her needs?).

MYTHLORE: Do you encounter many "Yes, but-" responses to your stories? Parts of the frame story of "Dream Weaver" show just that reaction.

YOLEN: The "Yes-buts" I receive are from people who, like my father, always wanted to know when I was going to grow up and write for adults. And when I started writing for adults, it was still that juvenile stuff fantasy. My father never read any of my 70+ books, but he did collect them and show them off. But mostly people seem awed that I can not only write down stories but think so many of them up.

MYTHLORE: What of reactions where the reader just doesn't understand?

YOLEN: Adults rarely tell me when they don't understand something. Children have no such censorship in their makeup until about 7th grade.

MYTHLORE: "Angelica" is a rather ambigous story. The angel of wisdom and faith saves Adolf Hitler from dying of a fever as a child and then leaves him in his bed. What did you want the reader to make of that?

YOLEN: She is not only the angel of wisdom and faith, she is the angel who put the serpent in the garden of Eden. Wisdom makes us realize that without evil there can be no good, without travail no success, without death no resurrection. Faith makes us undersand that there is a god even though there are serpents in all our Edens and that our belief in something greater than ourselves has nothing to do with whether evil exists or does not.

It is easier to believe in Hitler than angels. I just think there is not one without the other. But not real angels flying around with wings. I believe in the angelic experience, the person-as-angel. We have each met folks like that. Some of us even have acted that way -- on occasion.

And I like the irony of Hitler's ideas about the Aryan, golden and gleaming and perfect, being a sick transmutation of his experience with an angel. But to tell you the truth, when I began the story, the boy was just a boy and wasn't Hitler until a later draft!

MYTHLORE: What particular challenges did you find in using the long (that is, "novel") form for Cards of Grief?

YOLEN: For me any novel (I've written a number for kids and young adults) is a challenge because I am so comfortable with the short form. Making myself think on a broader scale, being willing to let some of the infinite fussing which a poem or a short story can handle (must have) go in order to deal with the greater sweep is difficult. Also I am a lousy chess player. I can't think six or seven moves ahead. So a novel, which has those six, seven, and more moves ahead coming, still unfolds for me the way a short story does. With Cards the challenge was doubled because I had already written two published short stories, "Cards of Grief" and "In the Hall of Grief" which formed the groundwork for the novel. It took me a long time to realize that whatever else I write, those two stories -- which I liked -- still existed as stories and only then could I let parts of them go. They were structurally wrong (and in some small instances the characters were wrong) for the novel. I had to reshape, refine, and rewrite them for the longer book.

MYTHLORE: In Cards of Grief, although the culture is focused on the ceremonial celebration of grief, it seems the people have actually lost touch with real grief. Was this intentional?

YOLEN: Yes, it was intentional. I had done a non-fictional book and a novel on the Shakers and one of the things that fascinated me was even in the short period of that religion (1776-today, but it's real high point was in the 1850's), the members of the Shakers had moved from an intense personal, daily relationship with every aspect of their religion to a more formalized, metaphoric, ritualized practice. That is what happens in L'Lal'lor. The grief is not really grief except (as Gray says somewhere in the book about the old country griefs) where a real death dealt with simply occurs.

MYTHLORE: Grief seems a rather unstable thing on which to base a culture. How did the idea come to you?

YOLEN: Now I must disagree. What is our most common human experience? Birth/Death. And death is the one that somehow startles us all. Also I wrote the book during a long grieving period for my father who had Parkinson's, was wheelchair bound, bedridden, with round-the-clock nursing and lived with me the final four years of his life. I knew what grief was, how pervasive, and how routinized it becomes. He "died" six times. The doctors gave him up six times in the

hospital over the final 3 1/2 years and each time I mourned, got myself ready, and he managed to pull through. The seventh time, when he did die, I was so surprised, I couldn't grieve for days.

MYTHLORE: A crucial point of the story is that change is a fearful thing to go through because there is no knowing what lies on the other side. The culture of L'Lal'lor is changed by the introduction of love as a personal commitment. That is a delicate balance to maintain for a story. Had you considered that when writing the book?

YOLEN: No. What happened in the book was as much a surprise to me as to any reader. In effect, I am the first reader of my books and stories and anything I really know about them happens afterwards, not during the time I am writing them.

MYTHLORE: You have begun writing a series of Arthurian stories. Do you find something imaginatively compelling about the Matter of Britain, and if so what?

YOLEN: I have always thought that Arthur was the Greatest Story Ever Told (much more so than the story of Christ) though I see different reasons each time I work with it. When I was younger, I wanted to be Arthur -- never Guinevere. Nowadays I tend towards Merlin -- not Morgana. Whenever I read a good retelling (White, Pyle, Stewart, Sutcliffe, Godwin) I get angry enough to throw the book against the wall because I want to be able to move readers that way. And then I realize anew that as fine as these writers are, it is the continuing power of that story to enchant us again and again that has really moved me. Each time I read an account of Arthur I hope... I desire... I fear... I grieve.

MYTHLORE: Your handling of the characters in this series seems to vary from story to story. Is that intentional, and if so why?

YOLEN: Yes, it is intentional. I want to put the Matter of Britain under as many microscopes as I can. Or rather I want to put all those wonderful colored pieces in my kaleidoscope and shake it once again and see which way and into which pattern the pieces fall.

MYTHLORE: In "The Dragon's Boy", the young Artos stumbles into a cave and meets with the voice of a dragon. He agrees to bring stew in exchange for "the getting of wisdom." This is delightfully marvelous, but the situation is not what it seems. Is it your intention to undercut the "marvelous"?

YOLEN: I call this story my Arthur Meets the Wizard of Oz. Merlin as a humbug -- and yet what he does is play on Arthur's sense of wonder as any good teacher will. I seriously considered calling the story "The Getting of Wisdom".

MYTHLORE: In "The Sword and the Stone," the marvelous is undercut again, with "Gawen's" using melted butter to remove the sword. Do you have an impulse to remove the major marvels of the legend?

YOLEN: Ah, but it is still marvelous. Gawen is really a woman. So she uses a homey trick. But Arthur, being a man still needed a different kind of magic. A magic outside himself. Hers comes from within. Arthur recognizes solutions to the same problem. I have spent some time in Quaker meetings and especially in the business meetings, where one has to find consensus, different (often unthought-of homey) solutions need to be gotten at.

It is easier to write a story in which you borrow a marvel -- the sword out of stone. That piece of legerdemain provokes a goshwow! every time. But magicians all know that some of the smaller tricks are the most difficult. And don't you think that convincing a simple, direct man he is strong enough and smart enough to rule wisely is a great trick?

MYTHLORE: "Gawen's" disquise is a delightful twist. How did the idea come to you?

YOLEN: I don't remember. But it goes back to my dislike of Guinevere who always seemed to be a re-action character, not an action character. As a girl, I wanted her to do some take-charge things. Nowadays we have Marion Zimmer Bradley's Guinevere and Godwin's Guenivere, and Newman's, etc. All written by goodfolk with a modern sensibility towards woman. (Also it occurs to me that my first book was Pirates in Petticoats about women pirates, and some of them cross-dressed and fooled their male cohorts in order to make their way in the world. Perhaps everything I do is tied together from book 1 to book 75 -- as Merlin's Booke is.)

MYTHLORE: In "Evian Steel," you present what appears to be a contemplative community of women, who incidently make swords. This seems a little incongruous. What inspired the combination?

YOLEN: Most contemplative communites need to do something to exist. Monastaries making wine, Shakers selling seeds (now that's incongrous since they believed that sex and even social intercourse between the sexes was evil and forbade it!), and nowhere do I say that the sisters of Ynis Evelonia are either contemplative and certainly never pacifists. They are called "holy" as it has to do with "magicks". An isle of (perhaps) sorceresses. That it resembles a nunnery -- still priests blessed and even fought side-by-side with crusaders. Mohamed urged the sword on the followers.

MYTHLORE: You make a distinction between blood of the heart and blood of the womb in the story, a distinction that on one level seems negatively directed toward womenhood and its generative energies. The women seem unaware of the possibilities of those energies. It certainly makes the climax effective, but seems to beg the question of the nature of the community. Had you thought about the implications of that when you wrote the story?

YOLEN: They have chosen celibacy. That is what is offered up. Most early communities (and many today) consider menstrual blood contaminated -- the rejected womb blood. This harkens back to many taboos in folklore around the world about the menstruating woman. This is Gwyneth's first time. A very powerful time. Merlin accepts how powerful it is. After all -- it makes Excaliber [sic]. Your argument is interesting, but it may be that after this happens (in a story yet to be written) certain of the women -- like Morgana -- might in fact want to incorporate such blood regularly. And in fact move from there to blood of innocents in general. That is another story, though. (And Morgana, not being an innocent, not having her first menstrual period -- in fact probably at this point going through menopause -- would have a different effect.)

MYTHLORE: You have a lively interest in the craft of writing. What advice, briefly, would you give to those who want to try their hand at writing fantasy?

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people one would like to be able to see. All in all, and I do mean all, Stephan P. Clarke's companion is a treasury and a triumph!

Nancy-Lou Patterson

## *Ratigan Redux*

The Great Mouse Detective. A Walt Disney animated film, based on the "Basil of Baker Street" books by Eve Titus. Barrie Ingham as Basil, Vincent Price as Ratigan, Alan Young as Mr. Flaversham, Val Bettin as Dr. Dawson, Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes. Music by Henry Mancini.

You will recall that when Digory and Polly journeyed to Narnia, "Mr. Sherlock Holmes was still living in Baker Street." At the same address was also living a very clever Mouse, the great detective's counterpart in the Mouse world. For it seems that under the floors and behind every wainscotting of Victorian London, every human, from the great Queen Victoria down to the lowest cutthroat, had a microscomic rodent doppelganger. C.S. Lewis would have been delighted to know this, fond as he was of "dressed animals", especially anthropomorphic mice.

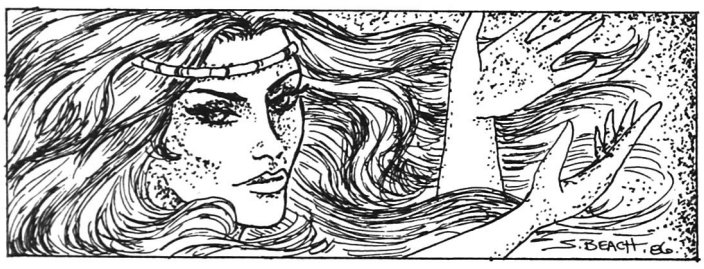
The Lewisian touch, however, is the fate of Ratigan in the climactic scene. The suave, urbane, sophisticated villain, who had been so wrathful at being reminded that he is a rat, is clearly revealed as nothing but a rat. His fine expensive clothes are ripped off his back by Big Ben's machinery, revealing the grey rat fur underneath. Together with his clothes, his fine airs are also shed, and he becomes nothing but a vile, snarling, vicious beast. The chilling, horrifying scene reminds me of the fates of Eustace, Ginger, the N.I.C.E. people, and Rabadash -- Lewisian characters who lost their humanity, or their anthropomorphism, as the natural consequence of their evil ways.

There is also a Tolkienian element -- in the character of Fidget the Bat, who is obviously a reincarnation of the Creeper in the Black Caldron film. That character was clearly patterned after Gollum (see review in Mythlore 46).

Though less impressive visually, The Great Mouse Detective is overall a much better movie than The Black Caldron. The visual effects are never allowed to become the center of attention, but they remain, as they should, subservient to the plot, and even more to the characters -- and marvelous characters they are, too.

Several changes have been made from Ms. Titus' books. To mention just one, Basil and Dr. Dawson (Dr. Watson's Mouse counterpart) here meet for the first time in 1897, a long time after their encounter according to the books. But such alterations by now are an unavoidable Disney tradition, and most of the changes seem to be improvements in this case.

Benjamin Urrutia





## *Mythopoeic Celtic Stationery by Patrick Wynne*

**This stationery is available for $5 plus $1 in handling. It features four designs, all found in Mythlore number 35: The Celtic circles portray themes from J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Charles Williams. Each circle is at the top right of the page and is 3 5/8" in diameter, with a lined border around the page. The fourth design is of the four corners found on the front of this sheet, but much larger in size. The set includes 4 sheets of each design, making 16 printed sheets, 12 blank sheets, plus 16 envelopes. The paper is of neutral but beautifully antique-appearing parchment. Each set makes fine personal stationery both for men and women, and are excellent for a special mythopoeic gift. Send your order to: Orders Department, 1008 N. Monterey St., Alhambra, CA 91801.**

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YOLEN: Read fantasy -- and as many different kinds as possible. Don't get stuck in just one -- high or low, humorous, tall tale, neolithic or future fantasy, time travel and all the rest. And to all writers I say, write everyday. Writing is a muscle that needs daily exercise or else it becomes flabby.

(This interview was conducted by mail)

"Dragonfield", "The Lady and the Merman", "The White Seal Maid", and "Angelica" are published in Dragonfield and Other Stories, Ace Fantasy Books: New York, 1985.

Cards of Grief, Ace Fantasy Books: New York, 1984.

"The Dragon's Boy", "The Sword and the Stone", and "Evian Steel" are published in Merlin's Booke, Ace Fantasy Books: New York, 1986.

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about in those cloud-banked skies in the sound of Thor's hammer: the sparks from the anvil will be flying and soon his feet will come crashing through the trees with wind and rain on his heels.